

## **Steps to Healing Sexually: Starting Your Sexual Recovery**

**By Staci Haines**

Sex is simple and incredibly complex all at the same time. Sex is filled with contradictions, pleasure, pains, satisfaction, confusion, desire, and a wide variety of emotions. Sex is a natural and fundamental part of humans. Even those who decide to be celibate have had to decide how to express their sexuality.

Sex is also used for contradictory purposes. It can be used for pleasurable and life-giving ends or misused and abused to hurt others. The contradictions in sex are especially apparent for the many women and men who have experienced some form of non-consensual sex or sexual trauma and abuse. Sex can get mixed with abuse for survivors and become very difficult to untwine later. Sexual healing can also be one of the most powerful aspects of recovery after sexual trauma and reap the greatest rewards.

### **Sexual Trauma**

Sexual trauma is all too common an experience for both women and men. Many people are sexually molested or abused as children and/or hurt by non-consensual sex or rape as adults. Even those who are not themselves survivors of sexual trauma often have been friends or partners with someone who is a survivor, and have been affected by the experience. Trauma is a deeply affecting experience for people. It shocks us mentally, emotionally and physiologically.

Being hurt sexually impacts people in a deep and fairly predictable way. The human body has built-in mechanisms to protect us from invasion and danger. We automatically respond to danger by preparing to fight, flee, or freeze to get away from the hurt or betrayal. Humans dissociate or “check out” to protect themselves from the impact of trauma. To dissociate is to move away from sensations, intensity, and the corresponding emotions of the trauma. This is an automatic (not conscious) response for survival.

When endangered, we respond automatically to find safety. We can, however, get caught in these responses and spend most of our time checked out or in a state of alertness awaiting the next danger. All of these responses, if not processed through the body, can live on in your automatic responses for years. You may be able to “understand” the experience differently, but the body will still respond like you are under attack, often in the most intimate of times.

Building intimacy and a satisfying sex life on top of those responses does not usually prove to be a lot of fun. Sex is an embodied experience, one that calls us into our sensations and pleasure, and into a different state of vulnerability with another person. If you or your partner(s) are “checked out,” or the past sexual trauma is so mixed in with today that you can’t quite tell the difference, the situation can end up defeating the whole purpose of having sex.

Many survivors of sexual trauma experience a variety of sexual effects. These may include the sense of not being “present” during sex, flashbacks or emotions connected to the abuse arising during consensual sex, distrust of trustworthy partners, and not being able to tell the difference between your sex partner and your abuser. People can struggle with sexual compulsion or sexual shutdown as a means of coping with the trauma, and may be swept into unsafe sex practices, an inability to connect sex and intimacy, or a low capacity for pleasure. Some survivors feel hatred of their own sexuality or body. Many survivors experience some physical pleasure or are brought to orgasm during abuse. This further complicates feelings about the abuse and about sex. Many survivors feel that the abuse was their fault or that their body betrayed them if it responded sexually. But when a body is stimulated in certain way we respond whether that stimulation is consensual or not.

## The Thing About Sex

The thing about sex is that sex is an embodied experience. The sensations, connection, pleasure and intensity of sex is something that we experience through our bodies. Plenty of people have dissociated sex, but good sex is an experience of being present with yourself and another. Sex is a positive and inherent part of who we are as humans. We are designed to experience pleasure in being sexual with ourselves and one another.

This aspect of being embodied is often where the trouble arises for survivors of sexual abuse. Being embodied is being connected to your own sensations, boundaries and emotions while being able to be connected to someone else. Since dissociating is the natural way the body survives sexual abuse, returning to your sensations and body can be fraught with history. Returning to the body often means facing, feeling, and working through the abuse stored there. It means addressing the impact of the abuse that can get triggered being present sexually with yourself and/or another.

Sex and intimacy can stir deep healing for people who have been hurt sexually. Although sometimes painful, sexual healing can be a powerful reckoning with your sensations, choices, boundaries and desires.

## Steps to Healing Sexually

You can heal the impact of past sexual harm, and have a sex life that works for you. Following are steps to sexual recovery:

- \*Work with the sexual trauma and its effects on your body.
- \*Complete and transition out of the automatic responses that trauma can leave behind in the body. It is vital to work through the body in recovery. This can include various forms of somatic bodywork or somatic processes.
- \*Move from dissociation to living within your own sensations.
- \*Practice being inside of your own skin. Trauma teaches you to live outside of your experience and become “checked out.” You can learn to face the

emotions and impact of the abuse while increasing your capacity for sensation, aliveness, and emotion.

\*Build on your strengths, resiliency and courage. Survivors are an incredibly resilient group of human beings. To survive sexual abuse you have to be resilient. If you are alive, you are more powerful than what happened to you.

\*Find the sensations and experiences in your body of strength, warmth, positive desire, courage, and dignity. What do they feel like? Build upon these by noticing them often and locating the corresponding sensations. Leverage your own resilience and strength for your sexual healing.

\*Educate yourself about sex. For most of us, sex education arrived through our peers, who knew as little as we did about sex. Often for survivors of sexual abuse, education about sex came through the abuse. Educating yourself sexually through current books, tapes, and educational videos is a must. What is it that you enjoy sexually? How do you know that? What do you know about your own sexual anatomy? Your own desires? Educate yourself sexually so that you can discover and then self-define what you like and desire. If you do not know the options, it is hard to know what you want.

\*Practice Pleasure. For sexual wellness you may need to rebuild your “tolerance” for pleasure and closeness with yourself and others. Self-pleasuring skills are as important as learning about pleasure with your partner. Abuse teaches you to tolerate suffering. Learning to allow and enjoy pleasure is an important step in healing sexually.

\*Move toward and through sexual triggers. Many survivors of sexual trauma are triggered into past experiences, emotions or memories of the abuse during sex. Understandably many also try to avoid these triggers by avoiding the experiences that trigger them. The problem with trying to avoid sexual triggers is twofold. One, if you avoid more and more experiences that trigger you, your life, including your sex life, gets smaller and smaller and you have fewer choices. The triggers and abuse end up running your sexuality. Secondly, triggers often show you exactly where there is healing to be done. By pushing through triggers, you unpack or “thaw out” those

areas that hold the trauma. Triggers can be moved through, so that what used to trigger you can no longer do so.

Healing sexually after sexual abuse gives you the opportunity to heal the very place of harm. You get to go into the center and reclaim the area as your own. Your pleasure, your expression, and your closeness with others become yours to define. You can discover your desires, your likes, your boundaries, and create a sex life of your own making.

“I think survivors (of sexual abuse) who have done their healing have some of the best sex lives around. We have to work through and deal with, heal and redefine sex for ourselves. We do all this healing work that most people really need to do, survivors or not.” From *The Survivor’s Guide to Sex*.

## **Pleasure**

I ran a workshop recently in New York talking about sex, pleasure and abuse. The participants were men and women who had experienced some type of physical or sexual abuse and many of their partners. We talked about the impact of trauma on their sex lives and particularly their experience of pleasure.

I think most folks just assume that pleasure is a great thing, no matter what. Who would turn away from or try to escape pleasure when so much of our time is spent pursuing it, after all? People may assume that abuse or trauma only creates a sense of distrust of touch or people, or a fear of being hurt again. Who would think that trauma and sexual abuse also leaves the survivor with a distrust of pleasure?

Our discussions in New York about abuse and pleasure mirrored so many others when it comes to the impact of abuse on a person’s subsequent experience of pleasure. Survivors have a whole array of responses to pleasure, some much less pleasurable than others.

There are a variety of ways that trauma impacts a person’s experience of pleasure. Here are common experiences you may have as a survivor when it comes to pleasure:

\*It is easier to allow and experience sexual pleasure with someone you are not close to or emotionally intimate with.

\*Sexual pleasure brings on a backwash of guilt and shame, like you are dirty, bad, or something is wrong with you.

\*Sexual pleasure brings on the feelings and sensations you had during the abuse. These may be fear, pain, panic, helplessness, anger, wanting to disappear. These experiences may be visual flashbacks or body sensations.

\*Sexual pleasure may also be thrown back to a response of feeling used or that you have to perform for the other, excluding yourself.

\*Pleasure of any sort, like relaxation, fun and humor, and physical pleasure can bring on a sense of not deserving, as if you are not supposed to have pleasure while it is all right for others.

\*Pleasure may also bring on a sense of danger and the need to stay hyper-alert. "If I let myself feel this, something bad is going to happen!"

\*Sexual pleasure can bring on a sense of being "found out." "If I really allow this much pleasure people will find out that... the abuse was my fault, I liked it, I am bad, etc."

Liking sex and feeling sexual pleasure can stir a reaction of feeling like a perpetrator or selfish. "If I like it this much, I must be like them."

If any of these reactions get stirred up for you when you experience pleasure you are not alone. The impact that trauma has on pleasure is confusing and normal. You can think of these responses as a bunch of crossed wires in your system. Instead of pleasure meaning pleasure, pleasure is mixed up with non-consensuality, fear, helplessness or shame. The feeling or sense of pleasure will still be there too, making it all the more confounding.

Our bodies respond automatically when we feel touch. This is wonderful when the touch is wanted and safe — when it is not, our bodies will still have a normal and biological response. In the case of sexual abuse, this

automatic response can lead to orgasm, even though the touch is non-consensual.

Our bodies also respond automatically to attack or danger. We will automatically react to protect ourselves. In the animal world we are familiar with the “fight or flight response.” This happens in humans too, along with the “freeze” response. Under distress we will respond automatically in one or more of these ways for survival. On the outside this may look like becoming very still, fighting, running, or disappearing deep inside yourself, or out of your body (dissociating).

Now, in many cases of abuse, both the pleasure responses and the protective responses can be happening simultaneously. This is what crosses all of those wires. This is not just a mental/emotional phenomenon, but also a physiological one.

For many survivors, the majority of whom are hurt by someone close to them, this ends up feeling like, “I hate you, I want you; I need you, get away from me; I can’t stand to be close to you, I need you to comfort me.” It is very confusing for survivors and in turn for their chosen partners. Anything that gets stirred up in you around pleasure, you can think of as remnants of the abuse left over in your body, mind and emotions. These automatic reactions in some way are signposts pointing to the experiences needing attention and healing. If you ignore them, try to squelch them or have sex on top of them, they usually get stronger. These wounds will find a different way to get your attention if you push them underground — coming out in your health, work, and relationships, instead.

When you find these reactions happening for you around pleasure you can know that the abuse and your self-protection and your normal, healthy pleasure responses are mixed up together. When you find this, you can pay attention to the reactions as places within you that need healing. You can do this by talking about them, writing and drawing, and very importantly, attending to them physiologically. What do I mean by this? Include your body as a central aspect of your healing through body-based therapy, a somatic trauma group, or emotional support paired with skilled bodywork. The trauma needs to be worked out of your body as well to “re-wire” those reactions.

The most important thing to do, although it may feel counter-intuitive, is to face into the sensations and emotions emerging while you feel pleasure. This may feel scary at first, but your courage will build as you do it. You also want to bring your sense of strength, courage or wisdom with you as you face your pleasure reactions. I mean by this bringing the feelings of being resourceful to the feelings of what was broken or wounded. The first helps to rebuild the second.

The second piece of equation to heal pleasure after abuse lies in finding pleasure on purpose. In some way practicing pleasure at the level that you can. It is like practicing so that you will get better and more familiar with pleasure. Not a bad thing to practice.

If you have a lot of reactions tied to sexual pleasure, or feeling pleasure in general, it's good to start small. This could be feeling the sun on your skin, or a breeze across your face. This could be really noticing the pleasurable flavor of something you like to eat. This is opening your senses up more to pleasure, and then noticing that nothing bad happens. Whatever way you decide to notice pleasure on purpose, notice it in and through your body. What are the sensations of it rather than the idea of it? It is the sensations and your body that are getting rewired.

After you have gotten good at experiencing the simple pleasures on your own (most people want to skip that stage) than you can begin to practice with somebody else. You might start with holding hands and have it lead to nothing else, or hair brushing, or long simple strokes down the body. Again the practice is pleasure — not pushing your self at too quick a pace. You can imagine you are learning something wonderful that you didn't get to learn the first time through. Take your time and learn it well.

## **Being There**

Have you ever had those sexual experiences where you or your partners were out to lunch while you were having sex? Maybe you were waiting for the sex to be over, thinking about the proverbial grocery list, or watching the wallpaper. Or perhaps it was your partner who was somewhere else. Maybe he or she seemed preoccupied, seemed to be thinking of something else, or it seemed like nobody was home. It can be an especially terrible experience when you feel this lack and ask your partner something like,



“Are you here? Are you thinking about something else?” and get the response “What you are talking about — I’m fine, what’s wrong with you?” Even if the position is hot, the orgasm is good, and the person is someone you like, the lack of being there can leave the sex disappointing at best and empty at worst. Although we humans have all kinds of sex, from recreational to spiritual, on some level we have sex to connect with another human being. If being with another person didn’t matter, we’d stick to masturbating.

Most of us don’t talk about being present or checked in — or otherwise — during sex. Mostly what I hear from folks is that they notice the lack of being there and then suffer with it alone. You may decide it is not a big deal and just fill in for the person, act as if your lover is with you. Or, you may not know how to ask your partner to be present during sex, or not know how to be there yourself.

So what is even important about being present, or checked in, for sex?

## Dissociated Sex

Many people experience checking out or not being very present for sex. This is called dissociating. Dissociating is a sense of removing or numbing yourself to others. It’s leaving your sensations, emotions and connection to yourself and others behind. You can experience this in many aspects of life, not just sex. Some folks make a lifestyle out of it.

Dissociation sometimes becomes more obvious during partnered sex, because that is a time when we are open to another human being in a way that leaves us more vulnerable than usual.

Some people describe dissociation as being caught up in their heads without contact to the rest of their bodies. Others talk about floating outside of themselves, being out of their bodies all together. Still others talk about pulling away from the surface of their skin, pulling themselves deep inside where they cannot really be touched. Many people only notice how removed they are with the contrast of a more present experience.

Dissociation at its core is a bodily or physiological phenomenon. The breath tends to get shallow in the upper chest. The small muscles in the body

contract, so that blood flow is constricted and there is less sensation and emotion. The change of breath and muscle contraction can cause a sense of floating away, or not being able to connect with or notice others as a separate three-dimensional person.

Dissociation is an automatic bodily response that we have little control over. It can be brief or last over years depending on the cause and need for protection or shutting down.

People dissociate for lots of different reasons — it's an automatic physiological response to high stress, danger, threat, or trauma. The threat can be large or small, real or imagined; the person must only perceive it as potentially dangerous. For some this is a new situation, or just the fact of being revealed or vulnerable, not necessarily a physical threat. For some people dissociation can be an automatic response left over from hurt or trauma that happened in the past. The dissociation can linger.

We are also culturally trained in it. Overall, our schooling, Western religions, and the violence we live around call us out of our senses and bodies and into a very mental, and at times anesthetized relationship, to ourselves, our bodies, other people and the world. What I mean by this is that our culture does not promote a life of being inside of and connected to our sensations and the information that comes from our bodies and physiology. We have learned to think of ourselves as a brain atop a body.

### Presence is the Deciding Factor

Presence is the deciding factor for hot sex, satisfying and connected sex, and sex over time with the same partner. New positions and creative expression are important to quality sex, but if you or your partner are not present or checked in, the others do not matter as much. It may be difficult or impossible for a relationship to last if one partner is not present during sex.

If you are in the process of recovery from abuse or trauma, learning to be connected to your own body, sensations and emotions is a cornerstone of healing. Coming back into yourself by contacting your sensations and emotions will allow you to move through the pain and let it leave your body.

You learn to respond to the present rather than automatically dissociating out of the past hurt or trauma.

When you are checked in you can feel your own sensations, emotions, boundaries, and sense of what you care about. You can be in the experience you are having rather than just thinking about it in your head. The other great piece about being present is that you can pay attention to your partner as well as yourself. When we live in a dissociated state it is easy to have people become living symbols in our minds, instead of real flesh in our beds with us.

You can feel the difference of presence. Most people talk about a magnetism, or sense of ease or trust that they notice when someone is present with them. There is a different possibility for being connected, and having a sense of meaning, depth or playfulness.

### Learning How

Being checked in or present is a learned skill that takes a little practice. If you are used to being off somewhere else during sex, it may seem strange at first to have your attention on your experience. To practice being checked in, bring your focus and attention into your own body, sensations, emotions and thoughts. While attending to yourself in this way, also pay attention to your partner. Practice paying attention to both yourself and your partner at the same time. (At first, it may seem like patting your head and rubbing your stomach.)

Notice how long can you stay present before you want to float off again. If you find yourself wanting to be away from the experience instead of present for it, see how that makes you feel. There may be information there for you. To get really good at being present during sex, practice noticing and feeling yourself from the neck down in your everyday life.

The practice of checking in during sex may be the best thing you ever give to your sex life and intimate relationships.

## **If Sex is so Great, Why am I Not Turned On?**

It is summer and it's hot — weather and otherwise. Flowers are blooming, the beaches are hopping, and movies are depicting sizzling sex scenes. Summer is supposedly the time for hot lovin'. With all this going on, you may feel a bit estranged from the rest of the planet if you find yourself uninterested in sex and just not feeling the call. You may be asking yourself, "If sex is so great, why do I not feel turned on?" Or, "Why do I not feel turned on with the person I want to be with?" These are good questions and ones that more people than you are asking.

Sexual disinterest is common, but people often feel ashamed to really talk about their lack of sexual desire. Some talk about it in the context of long-term relationships. They've been together too long, their partner is too familiar, etc. It's true, there is an art to staying sexually creative through long-term relationships, but this is a small part of the picture when it comes to sexual disinterest. Many things influence our interest in sex, whether we are talking about sex with ourselves, a long-term partner, or a date. Age and hormones, mental and physical health, histories of abuse or trauma, stress, emotional upset, and a downward turn in the trust or safety in a relationship can all impact your sex drive. Addressing sexual disinterest goes beyond trying a new sex tip or technique. I find that in order to experience and sustain sexual aliveness, a deeper look is usually called for.

What do I mean? Let me give you some examples of people who struggle with sexual disinterest.

### *Yolanda*

Yolanda is personable, smart and has a hard time with sex. She finds it difficult to feel sexual desire and enjoy it. She knows how to talk about sex and does with her friends, but is conflicted about it herself. She had a very religious upbringing in which sex was considered sinful. She was also found masturbating as a child and shamed for her exploration. This may sound like a typical story, but the impact can be long lasting for people. For Yolanda sex and desire also bring guilt and shame. When she gets sexually aroused, she feels bad and ashamed. After a while you learn to not get sexually aroused to avoid the pain that comes with it.

Many people do not want to get sexually aroused because the other things they feel that come with it are too painful like shame, intense fear, feeling endangered, dirty, or unworthy. They would rather feel less sex drive so they can feel less pain.

### *Michael*

Michael has a successful career. He is quiet and self-reflective, and for him sex is a messy can of worms. He has been married for 15 years to a woman he still loves. Yet, soon after they were married he found himself uninterested in having sex with her. He tried a number of excuses, even tried to have sex when he didn't want to, but his disinterest only grew. Meanwhile she was frustrated, confused and angry. He grew more withdrawn and guilty trying to make up for it, and then tried to avoid the topic altogether. Michael also found himself sexually attracted to other women, and began to have affairs. So here he is, in love with his wife, not at all interested in sex with her — and having sex with women he doesn't want to marry. He is sexually interested in the affairs but cannot seem to find any sexual interest at home.

This is not your common locker room talk. Who can you openly talk to about this kind of experience? Michael's history is one of being sexually abused as a child. The closer he gets emotionally to someone the more dangerous it feels to be sexual. But what is going to happen when his partner finds out he is having sex with other women and not her? Many men have histories of sexual abuse that affect their desire and relationship to sex and intimacy.

### *Lore and Tony*

Lore and Tony have been together for 6 years. Two years ago Lore had sex outside their relationship that Tony found out about. They stayed together through this and patched things up, but there is lingering distrust and questions on Tony's side. Why did Lore have sex with someone else, am I not desirable? Is she going to do this again even though she says she won't? They still have sex, but it is less frequent and they are less vulnerable with each other. It is harder for Tony to feel turned on with the mistrust she feels. When there is mistrust or betrayal that is left un-

mended, sex and our willingness to risk get effected. Sex takes openness and trust to sustain over time.

What is it Like for Partners?

Being with a partner that does not have sexual interest or regular sexual desire can be very difficult. It is almost impossible to not take it personally. The reasons for your partner's lack of desire may not be about you, but either way it is hard on the self esteem and is intimately frustrating. Sex needs to be addressed and taken on as something vital to both partners in a relationship. I have seen very few relationships be successful over time without taking on sexual disinterest and coming up with mutual solutions that bring sex back into the relationship.

So what is there to do about a lack of sexual desire? The thing about sexual interest is that you can't just will it to be different and expect any change. You can't think your way out of it. There are concrete steps you can take over time that will make a difference around your sexual desire, however. Here are some of those steps:

\*Reflect on and develop your own, very personal reason to have your sexuality be an alive and healthy part of yourself. Find a strong leverage point for yourself — why does sexual desire matter to you? Not something like, "Well it would be nice to feel it," but a reason that really moves you internally. Maybe your reason is that your mother and the women in your family before her lived without that kind of pleasure and you're not going to for another generation! Or your reason could be that you don't have full access to your creativity if you aren't connected to your sexuality. You need to find your own reason to have your sexuality.

\* Awaken your sexuality through daily practices — we become what we practice. When we aren't connected to and feeling our desire regularly we get bogged down sexually. It's like we get rusty and have to get things moving again. When you awaken your sexuality daily, it is much easier to stay connected to your desire.

To get connected:

\* Bring your attention and breath to your sex, desire and your pelvis. Breathe into your lower body while you begin to feel the sensations in your body. Now rock your pelvis forward and back. This is one of the natural motions our bodies make when aroused. Feel your sensations and body. Practice this for 5 minutes a day. See what happens — instead of trying to control your responses or run away, stay there with yourself and be curious about what shows up. Practiced regularly, this is a sure path to your sexual desire and will also show you what is in the way of it.

\* Yabyam. Another practice is to sit in what the Tantrikas call yabyam with your partner daily. You do this by sitting face to face, one person on the others lap, legs wrapped around your partners back. If this is not comfortable, sit face to face, with your legs wrapped around each other's backs. Then set the timer for 5 minutes. Sit and breathe feeling your own body and looking into your partner's eyes. Breath from the pelvis all the way up to the top of the head, stopping at the genitals, belly, the diaphragm, heart, throat, forehead, and the top of the head. The Tantrikas use this as a time to consciously connect their spirituality to their sexuality.

\* Practice sexual arousal without orgasm with yourself and your partner. Make a deal not to go toward orgasm and slow everything down. Focus on the feelings and connection. This gives you a pressure-free chance to work with the emotions and experiences that may be effecting your desire.

\* If you find that past painful experiences or trauma are in the way of an open sexuality for you, seek out resources and appropriate help. Past hurts and trauma are mendable, and they don't get worked through by ignoring them. Taking on the work of healing and recovery are well worth the benefits that your own sexuality and pleasure bring.

\* Prioritize sex in your relationship with yourself and your partner. What does that mean? Time. Make, schedule, cajole, and find, time for your sexual expression and life. Especially in long-term relationships, other parts of your life tend get most of your time. Remember, though; we become what we practice regularly. What lies dormant and unattended to stays that way. Sex and desire need care and feeding and regular attention. Make time for yourself sexually and sex with your partner. The pay-off greatly outweighs the investment.

## Masturbation and Healing

In honor of masturbation month, I'd like to celebrate one of the many wonderful ways masturbation contributes to our lives: healing. Far from a dirty little secret, masturbation is a great ally in healing your body, your psyche, and your pleasure.

Most people I talk to about sex care about some very fundamental things. They care about getting to express themselves sexually in ways that feel real and satisfying to them. They care about being close to and intimate with the people they love. They care about being able to trust their partners and have sexual choices. But if a person does not have a positive relationship with his or her body, what can be most important is finding that. People do not want the hurt and betrayals of their pasts to run their intimate lives today, sexually or romantically. Long-term relationships are greatly enriched, and often fundamentally driven, by a wonderful sex life together. What, then, does masturbation have to do with intimacy — something that we think of as having to do with partnered sex?

Lots of us come to partnered sex with a very uncertain relationship to our own bodies, pleasure, and sexuality. Too often we assume that the right relationship will take care of our struggles around sex or (dis)trust. And to some extent a relationship can help us work through those struggles. But the only person we have a lifelong sexual relationship with is ourselves. We bring this relationship with ourselves to all of our other sexual relationships. It becomes the template for sex and intimacy with everybody else. Getting to know yourself sexually and having a positive relationship with your pleasure are fundamental to whatever kind of sex and intimacy you want with others. Masturbation is the way to get there.

One of the great things about masturbation is that it allows you time away from the complications of partner sex. You do not have to pay attention to someone else's responses or pleasure. Being sexual with yourself gives you the room to check out your own body and responses. It lets you discover what feels good, what feels bad and where you need to attend to your own sexuality. Your only real job in being sexual with yourself is to feel, listen and learn.

There are lots of types of masturbation. A three-minute [vibrator](#) job, the bathroom break, or a six-hour session of self-pampering. Masturbation can



be used to relax or release frustration. Masturbation can be filled with fantasies that take you away to engaging places.

The masturbation I want to suggest is self-pleasuring less focused on orgasm, and more on discovering a positive relationship with your own sexuality and intimacy. If you're already masturbating in other ways, there's no need to stop; rather, I would suggest adding a type of masturbation that assists you in building a lasting relationship with yourself.

When was the last time you spent a couple of hours with yourself being sexual? Most of us can't remember the last time — or we never have. We aren't usually taught to spend a lot of time with ourselves sexually. It's not very common to have someone call in sick to work and say "Sorry, I can't come in today — I am taking a quality day of self pleasuring!"

Mostly, to have a healthy and sustaining relationship with your own sexuality, body and psyche, you've got to work for it. It takes spending time with yourself as well as being willing to feel a wide variety of emotions and sensations.

Masturbation, just like sex, can take us through sadness, to uncertainty, to pleasure and trust and back again. Your upbringing and beliefs about sex and intimacy will arise during masturbation if you slow down and listen to yourself like you would a new love interest. Be curious about what shows up in your mind and body when you get present to listen.

### A Healing Masturbation

Take one hour of your time and set it aside for you, your sex and your body. Set up a beautiful space that is inviting to you. You may want to set it up with a spiritual flavor or a sexy flare. Bring any [lube](#) and toys you may want, along with a mirror and a towel.

The intention in a healing masturbation is to be present with yourself and your body. This is an opportunity for you to be curious about you. The aim is not orgasm, but to discover.

Touch your whole body. Try touching softly and firmly. Use smooth strokes all the way to slaps or pinches. While you are touching yourself, breathe.

Breathe from your pelvis all the way up to your chest and heart. Connect your genitals to your heart. Move your body, especially your pelvis.

Allow sensation to spread up and down your body. Rather than going for the orgasm, let the eroticism build. If emotions arise like sadness, anger or fear, feel them as sensations in your body and let them be there, coming forward and expressing themselves through you. Practice being present and curious about yourself.

Lastly, notice and orient yourself toward pleasure and trust. What gives you this experience erotically?

This may be an incredibly erotic hour of play, or an hour of tears and self-comforting. Either way, you will finish your healing masturbation with a deeper experience of you, your sex, and your body. You will have spent quality time on the foundation of your sexual relationships — yourself.

## **What Is Consent?**

Consent is the ability to choose, based on your own internal experience, what you want physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and sexually. Consent also includes clearly communicating those wants to your partner(s). It means being responsible for taking care of your boundaries, needs and desires. Consent is an ongoing process of making choices. You can consent to one thing and not to another, or change your mind at any point in an experience, including a sexual encounter.

Most people think about consent as the ability to say “no.” “No,” however, is only one response to a possible choice — “yes” is another. And between “yes” and “no” there is a huge territory, which I call the land of “maybe.” In that land, you can take time to notice and reflect on what you want, decide if a certain choice takes care of what you care about, and look at taking healthy risks. You can think of that territory as “I don’t know, I’ll get back to you about that.” It is where you initially spend most of your time when it comes to consent and boundaries.

When it comes to sex, many folks think that you get to say “yes” or “no” once and then it’s over. Consent is an ongoing set of choices. You can be hot and heavy into kissing, decide you are done for now, and choose to

stop. You can be in the middle of oral sex and decide that you do not want to continue. You can say “maybe” to penetration, and later decide you do want to try it. You can say “yes” to sex as often as you like. You can ask for your stomach to be touched and not your hips. What you said “no” to last time might be a “yes” this time, and vice versa. This is a different concept of consent to most people, especially those who have been abused or hurt sexually. Returning choice to sex is vital in the recovery process.

Many people who have a history of abuse or trauma learn about consent through these experiences. Abuse and trauma do not allow for consent. People are impacted very deeply by non-consensual or “partially” consensual sex. They can often leave believing that they do not matter, their needs and consent are irrelevant, and that they have no power to take care of themselves. Through abuse people learn to disregard their own internal sense of boundaries and to pay more attention to others’ needs.

While this is a great survival strategy during abuse, over time survivors lose contact with what they want and an ability to consent based upon their own needs and desires. Their lives are run by others’ needs whether they meet your needs or not. Nearly all survivors of child sexual abuse report having had sex as adults when they didn’t want to. Trauma or sexual abuse can also have the effect of turning consent upside down and inside out. “No” meant “yes,” and “yes” meant “no.” Saying “no” had no effect or may have brought on worse abuse. You may have been manipulated into asking for sexual contact. Sexual contact may have been your only source of comfort or connection.

Reflect for yourself where and what you learned about consent. What experiences were most impactful in teaching you about consent? Did you learn that you and others have full choice when it comes to your bodies and sexuality? What did you learn from your family, your community, and your social environment? Often what we think is right regarding consent is different than our actions and behaviors are. I encourage you to reflect on both.

Here are some women’s experiences from *The Survivor’s Guide to Sex*:  
“It’s automatic for me. If I have a boundary that my lover doesn’t like, I start figuring out how to change it, how to fit me to what he wants. – Janet

“Surprisingly, saying what I wanted sexually made me more nervous than saying “no.” I thought, “Who am I to actually ask for the sex I want?” I did not feel deserving of it. I felt like a slut sometimes, and I felt shame that I was being so forward. This was all muck from the abuse that I had to work through.” – Sheila

To be good at consent takes learning and practice. You may assume that consent is an easy or obvious process, but usually it is not. It is something we learn how to do, and many of us did not have very good lessons. Consent is initially an inside job. To get good at consenting, you need to be in touch with your own desires, mental and emotional states, and the feelings and sensations in your body. You need to know what you like sexually, and where you are willing to explore. You need enough information to make a decision that serves your interests. Finally, you need to know how to communicate your consent to your partners. Each of these aspects of consent requires learning and practice. We will focus on these in the next column.

Having full say about your own body does not mean disregarding others’ feelings. It means that you have full say over you, while others have the same say over their bodies and sexuality. Some people are so unaccustomed to having choice over their own sexuality that they confuse choice with selfishness. They ask, “What about what the other person wants?” The other person’s wants are just as valid and valuable as yours — just not more so. Find sexual experiences that will delight both of you, or don’t be sexual together at all.

Check out:

Staci Haines’ 2019 masterpiece: *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing and Social Justice*

Staci Haines’ film: [\*Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma\*](#)